

# Life in Medieval Japan

## Get-Ready to Read!

### What's the Connection?

In the last section, you learned how warriors known as shoguns and samurai came to rule Japan. During that time, the Japanese suffered from many wars. However, Japan's economy continued to grow, and its people produced beautiful art, architecture, and literature.

### Focusing on the Main Ideas

- Buddhism and Shinto shaped much of Japan's culture. These religions affected Japanese art, architecture, novels, and plays. (page 499)
- Some Japanese nobles, merchants, and artisans grew wealthy during the shogun period, but the lives of women remained restricted in many areas of life. (page 503)

### Locating Places

Kyoto (kee•OH•toh)

### Meeting People

**Murasaki Shikibu** (MUR•uh•SAH•kee shee•kee•boo)

### Building Your Vocabulary

sect (SEHKT)

martial arts (MAHR•shuhl)

meditation (MEH•duh•TAY•shuhn)

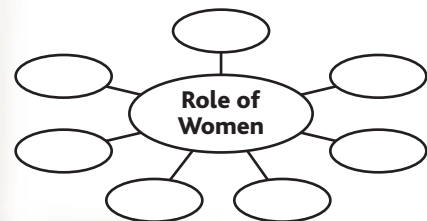
calligraphy (kuh•LIH•gruh•fee)

tanka (TAHNG•kuh)

guild (GIHLD)

### Reading Strategy

**Summarizing Information** Complete a diagram like the one below describing the role of women in the families of medieval Japan.



## When & Where?



1000

c. 1000  
Lady Murasaki Shikibu writes *The Tale of Genji*

1200

c. 1100s  
Zen Buddhism spreads in Japan

1400

c. 1300s  
Noh plays first performed

# Japanese Religion and Culture

**Main Idea** Buddhism and Shinto shaped much of Japan's culture. These religions affected Japanese art, architecture, novels, and plays.

**Reading Focus** Have you ever seen paintings, sculptures, and works of literature that have religious subjects or messages? In medieval Japan, the religions of Shinto and Buddhism greatly influenced the arts.

During the Middle Ages, religion was a part of everyday life for the Japanese. Most Japanese came to believe in both Buddhism and Shinto, and worshiped at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. To them, each religion met different needs. Shinto was concerned with daily life, while Buddhism prepared people for the life to come. During the Middle Ages, Buddhist ideas inspired many Japanese to build temples, produce paintings, and write poems and plays.

**Pure Land Buddhism** As you have already learned, Mahayana Buddhism began in India and spread to China and Korea. By the time Buddhism reached Japan, it had developed into many different **sects** (SEHKTS), or smaller religious groups.

One of the most important sects in Japan was Pure Land Buddhism. Pure Land Buddhism was a type of Mahayana Buddhism. It won many followers in Japan because of its message about a happy life after death. Pure Land Buddhists looked to Lord Amida, a buddha of love and mercy. They believed Amida had founded a paradise above the clouds. To get there, all they had to do was have faith in Amida and chant his name.

**What Is Zen Buddhism?** Another important Buddhist sect in Japan was Zen. Buddhist monks brought Zen to Japan from China during the 1100s. Zen taught that



▲ A Zen monk sits beside a Japanese rock garden while meditating. **What is the purpose of meditation?**

people could find inner peace through self-control and a simple way of life.

Followers of Zen learned to control their bodies through **martial arts** (MAHR•shuhl), or sports that involved combat and self-defense. This appealed to the samurai, who trained to fight bravely and fearlessly.

Followers of Zen Buddhism also practiced **meditation** (MEH•duh•TAY•shuhn). In meditation, a person sat cross-legged and motionless for hours, with the mind cleared of all thoughts and desires. Meditation helped people to relax and find inner peace.

**Art and Architecture** During the Middle Ages, the Japanese borrowed artistic ideas from China and Korea. Then, they went on to develop their own styles. The arts of Japan revealed the Japanese love of beauty and simplicity.

During the Middle Ages, artisans in Japan made wooden statues, furniture, and



# Linking Past & Present

## Martial Arts

**THEN** According to legend, the Chinese monks who brought martial arts to Japan in the 1100s learned them from an Indian monk named Bodhidharma. In the sixth century, he traveled to China and found monks at a temple who were weak and sleepy from meditation, so he taught them martial arts to strengthen their bodies. Over time, many forms of martial arts developed.



▲ Figurine of Bodhidharma

▼ Modern-day martial artist



**NOW** Martial arts remain popular and respected. Current forms include karate, jujitsu, and aikido from Japan; kung fu from China; and tae kwon do from Korea. *What sports or activities do you participate in that help strengthen your mind and body?*

household items. On many of their works, they used a shiny black and red coating called lacquer. From the Chinese, Japanese artists learned to do landscape painting. Using ink or watercolors, they painted scenes of nature or battles on paper scrolls or on silk. Japanese nobles at the emperor's court learned to fold paper to make decorative objects. This art of folding paper is called origami. They also arranged flowers. Buddhist monks and the samurai turned tea drinking into a beautiful ceremony.

Builders in Japan used Chinese or Japanese styles. Shinto shrines were built in

the Japanese style near a sacred rock, tree, or other natural feature that they considered beautiful. Usually a shrine was a wooden building, with a single room and a roof made of rice straw. People entered the shrine through a sacred gate called a torii.

Unlike Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples were built in the Chinese style. They had massive tiled roofs held up by thick, wooden pillars. The temples were richly decorated. They had many statues, paintings, and altars.

Around their buildings, the Japanese created gardens designed to imitate nature

in a miniature form. Some of these gardens had carefully placed rocks, raked sand, and a few plants. They were built this way to create a feeling of peace and calmness.

**Poems and Plays** During the A.D. 500s, the Japanese borrowed China's writing system. They wrote their language in Chinese picture characters that stood for whole words. Because the Japanese and Chinese languages were so different, the Japanese found it difficult to use these characters. Then, in the A.D. 800s, they added symbols that stood for sounds, much like the letters of an alphabet. This addition made reading and writing much easier.

**Calligraphy** (kuh•lih•gruh•fee), the art of writing beautifully, was much admired in Japan. Every well-educated person was expected to practice it. A person's handwriting was considered to reveal much about his or her education, social standing, and character.

During the Middle Ages, the Japanese wrote poems, stories, and plays. Japan's oldest form of poetry was the **tanka** (TAHNG•kuh). It was an unrhymed poem of five lines. Tanka poems capture nature's beauty and the joys and sorrows of life. The following tanka was written by an anonymous poet:

“On autumn nights  
the dew is  
colder than ever—  
in every clump of grasses  
the insects weep”  
—author unknown,  
tanka from the *Kokinshū*

Women living in Heian wrote Japan's first great stories around 1000. One woman,

Lady **Murasaki Shikibu** (MUR•uh•SAH•kee shee•kee•boo), wrote *The Tale of Genji*. This work describes the adventures of a Japanese prince. Some people believe the work is the world's first novel, or long fictional story.

About 200 years later, Japan's writers turned out stirring tales about warriors in battle. The greatest collection was *The Tale of Heike*. It describes the fight between the Taira and the Minamoto clans.

The Japanese also created plays. The oldest type of play is called Noh. Created during the 1300s, Noh plays were used to teach Buddhist ideas. Noh plays were performed on a simple, bare stage. The actors wore masks and elaborate robes. They danced, gestured, and chanted poetry to the music of drums and flutes.

**Reading Check Analyze** How are martial arts and meditation connected to Zen Buddhism's principle of self-control?



▲ Noh masks like these were often carved from a single piece of wood and were lightweight, so an actor could wear it for several hours. **Why were Noh plays performed?**



# Biography

## MURASAKI SHIKIBU

c. A.D. 973–1025

Murasaki Shikibu was a great novelist and poet of the Japanese Heian period. She was one of the first modern novelists. Murasaki became famous from writing *The Tale of Genji*, but her work also included a diary and over 120 poems.

Murasaki was born into the Fujiwara clan, a noble family but not a rich family. Her father was a scholar and a governor. In fact, the name Shikibu refers to her father's position at court. Murasaki's mother and older sister died when she was a child. Traditionally, children were raised by the mother and her family, but Murasaki's father decided to raise his daughter himself. He broke another custom by educating his daughter in Chinese language and literature, subjects reserved for boys.

Murasaki married and had a daughter, but her husband died after only a few years of marriage. Around that time, Murasaki began writing *The Tale of Genji* and working as an attendant to Empress Akiko. She based the novel on life at court, which she knew about through her father's job and her own. The last reference to her is in 1014, but many scholars believe that she lived for about a decade after that.

Much about Murasaki's life—and life at the emperor's palace—is revealed in her diary. This excerpt describes the preparations for a celebration honoring the birth of a new prince:

“Even the sight of the lowest menials [servants], chattering to each other as they walked round lighting the fire baskets under the trees by the lake and arranging the food in the garden, seemed to add to the sense of occasion. Torchbearers stood everywhere at attention and the scene was as bright as day.”

—Murasaki Shikibu,  
*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*



▲ Murasaki Shikibu



▲ Scene from  
*The Tale of Genji*

### Then and Now

Do you keep a diary? What might you and your classmates record in a diary that would be useful to people a few centuries from now?



## Economy and Society

**Main Idea** Some Japanese nobles, merchants, and artisans grew wealthy during the shogun period, but the lives of women remained restricted in many areas of life.

**Reading Focus** What determines whether a person is wealthy or poor? Read to find what contributed to the growing wealth of Japan.

Under the shoguns, Japan not only developed its arts but also produced more goods and grew richer. However, only a small number of Japanese benefited from this wealth. This group included the emperor, the nobles at his court, and leading military officials. A small but growing class of merchants and traders also began to prosper. Most Japanese, however, were farmers who remained poor.

**Farmers and Artisans** Much of Japan's wealth came from the hard work of its farmers. Japanese farmers grew rice, wheat, millet, and barley. Some had their own land, but most lived and worked on the daimyo estates. Despite hardships, life did improve for Japan's farmers during the 1100s. They used better irrigation and planted more crops. As a result, they could

send more food to the markets that were developing in the towns.

At the same time, the Japanese were producing more goods. Artisans on the daimyo estates began making weapons, armor, and tools. Merchants sold these items in town markets throughout Japan. New roads made travel and trade much easier. As trade increased, each region focused on making goods that it could best produce. These goods included pottery, paper, textiles, and lacquered ware. All of these new products helped Japan's economy grow.

As the capital, **Kyoto** (kee•OH•toh) became a major center of production and trade. Many artisans and merchants settled there. They formed groups called **guilds** (GIHLDZ) (or *za* in Japanese) to protect and increase their profits. The members of these guilds relied on a wealthy daimyo to protect them from rival artisans. They sold the daimyo goods that he could not get from his country estates.

Japan's wealth also came from increased trade with Korea, China, and Southeast Asia. Japanese merchants exchanged lacquered goods, sword blades, and copper for silk, dyes, pepper, books, and porcelain.



◀ This painting shows Japanese farmers working the land. **What were some crops grown by medieval Japanese farmers?**

**The Role of Women** During the Middle Ages, a Japanese family included grandparents, parents, and children in the same household. A man headed the family and had total control over family members. A woman was expected to obey her father, husband, and son. In wealthy families, parents arranged the marriages of their children to increase the family's wealth.

In early Japan, about the time of Prince Shotoku, wealthy women enjoyed a high position in society. There were several women rulers, and women could own property. When Japan became a warrior society with samurai and daimyo, upper-class women lost these freedoms.

In farming families, women had a greater say in whom they married. However, they worked long hours in the fields planting or harvesting rice. In addition, they cooked, spun and wove cloth, and cared for their children. In the towns, the wives of artisans and merchants helped with family businesses

and ran their homes. The wives of merchants were perhaps the best off.

Despite the lack of freedom, some women managed to contribute to Japan's culture. These talented women gained fame as artists, writers, and even warriors. In *The Tale of the Heike*, one female samurai named Tomoe is described this way:

“Tomoe was indescribably beautiful; the fairness of her face and the richness of her hair were startling to behold. Even so, she was a fearless rider and a woman skilled with the bow. Once her sword was drawn, even the gods . . . feared to fight against her. Indeed, she was a match for a thousand.”

—Heike Monogatori,  
*The Tale of the Heike*

**Reading Check** **Identify** Which groups in Japan benefited from the country's wealth?

## Section 3 Review

**History**  **online**

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### Reading Summary

#### Review the Main Ideas

- In medieval Japan, several forms of Buddhism, along with Shinto, were practiced, and the arts, architecture, and literature flourished.
- During the time of the shoguns, Japan's economy grew stronger. In the family, women lost some of their freedoms as Japan became a warrior society.

### What Did You Learn?

1. How did the Shinto and Buddhist religions meet different needs in Japan?
2. What were Noh plays, and how were they performed?
4. **Describe** How did guilds benefit artisans and daimyos?
5. **Analyze** Why do you think women lost some of their freedoms when Japan became a warrior society?

#### Critical Thinking

##### 3. Organizing Information

Draw a table like the one shown. Add details to show the characteristics of Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism	Zen Buddhism

6. **Descriptive Writing** Write a brief article for a travel magazine describing the architecture of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan during the Middle Ages.